PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIANITY

Progressive Christianity—this term sounds so positive. The word, *progressive*, suggests new creative methods or a "cutting-edge approach" to ministry. It may be seen as "out-of-the-box" thinking.

What a misnomer!

Instead of being a positive to be adopted, progressive Christianity is in complete opposition to the beliefs of orthodox Christianity. It stands as an alternative to the truth (biblical or theological) upon which the Church has been built throughout the centuries. From the earliest centuries of Christianity, persecution has not been able to destroy the Church. However, *heresy*, or false doctrine, has been successful in weakening the character and mission of the Church to the point of losing its identity.

Heretical doctrines frequently arise from misinterpretation of Scriptures, putting personal experiences above Biblical truth, an overemphasis on a topic, an extreme opposite position to a particular problem, or attempting to make Christianity palatable to the views of current culture. Of special interest is how many of them are simply a variable repeat of what can be seen in previous decades and centuries. All of the above can be found in progressive Christianity.

BACKGROUND

The views held within progressive Christianity have been drawn from a variety of historical sources (individuals) and have continued even into to the 21st century. The emphasis on the social gospel can be traced back to Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918). His views were "predicated on the idea that the Church must realize the kingdom of God on earth rather than to talk about a future millennial kingdom." [1] He is considered the foremost American apostle of the social gospel.

Frederick D. E. Schleiermacher (1768-1834) "made feelings or emotions the element out of which religious experience develops," He believed that religion wasn't a set of beliefs and obligations based on the authority of the Church, but was the result of man's feelings of absolute dependence in a majestic universe. . . . [2]

Not to be overlooked is Charles Darwin's (1809-1882) theory of evolution. When applied to religion, "God and the Bible were looked upon as the evolutionary products of man's religious conscience. . . . "[3]

The decline of church attendance and the youth exodus from local churches stimulated Jim Adams, rector of St. Mark's Church on Capitol Hill, D.C., to found the Center for Progressive Christianity (1994). Later it became known as *progressivechristianity.org*. Several years later, in the same decade, a gathering of youth pastors (2.0) saw the dismal statistics of losing youth from the church. Their concern and efforts became known as the "emerging

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[1] Earle E. Cains, *Christianity Through the Centuries: A History of the Christian Church*, (Zondervan Publishing House. Grand Rapids. 1996) 438, 439.

[2] Ibid, 419.

[3] Ibid, 423.

church". It had two separate divisions—*emerging* and *emergent*. The latter was "open to rethinking theology and scripture to the point of abandoning absolutes of historic Christianity." [4]

COMMON BELIEFS OF PROGRSSIVE CHRISTIANITY

In her book, *Another Gospel,* Alisa Childers relates a short conversation which took place during the journey finding her way through the teachings of a progressive pastor. "Once during choir rehearsal, for a night of worship, one of my fellow classmates stood next to me on the riser and giggled 'it's funny that we're singing all these songs and none of us have any idea what we believe.'"[5]

We begin this section with the eight points of beliefs and affirmations presented by the Center for Progressive Christianity. There have been several revisions to this core. What follows is the latest dated January 17, 2020. These affirmations state that they:

1. Believe that following the path and teachings of Jesus can lead to healing and wholeness, a mystical connection to "God," as well as an awareness and experience of not only the Sacred, but the Oneness and Unity of all life.
2. Affirm that the teachings of Jesus provide but one of many ways to experience the Sacredness and the Oneness of life, and that we can draw from diverse sources of wisdom including Earth in our spiritual journey.
3. Seek and create community that is inclusive of ALL people, including but not limited to:
   - Conventional Christians and questioning skeptics
   - Believers and agnostics
   - Women and men
   - Those of all races, cultures, and nationalities
   - Those of all sexual orientations and gender identities
   - Those of all classes and abilities
   - All creatures and plant life
4. Know that the way we behave towards one another and Earth is the fullest expression of what we believe, therefore we vow to walk as Jesus might have walked in this world with racial compassion, inclusion, and bravery to confront and positively change the injustices we experience as well as those we see others experiencing.
5. Find grace in the search for understanding and believe there is more value in questioning with an open mind and open heart, than in absolutes or absolutes.
6. Work toward peace and restore justice among all people and all life on Earth.
7. Protect and restore the integrity of our Earth and all Creation.
8. Commit to a path of lifelong learning, compassion, and selfless love on this journey toward a personally authentic and meaningful faith.[6]

These eight statements reflect the mission of *ProgressiveChristianity.org*. which is "to be an authentic voice for progressive Christianity by positively transforming the world through informed theology, spirituality, social justice, and environmental stewardship."[7] From this

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[4] Jerald Daffe, *Crosses, Coffee, Couches, & Community (Cleveland, Pathway Press, 2013) 43.*
[5] Alisa Childers, *Another Gospel* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, 2020) 28.
[6] *https: progressivechristianity.org/mission/* (Accessed Jan.21, 2023)
[7] *https: progressivechristianity.org/mission/* (Accessed Oct. 25, 2021)

mission statement, one can see that although they have adopted many positive ethical principles, there is no organized doctrinal position such as seen in the creeds of historical Christianity (Apostles, Nicene, and our own Church of God Declaration of Faith). Everything is open to be deconstructed and put within the arenas of subjective interpretation based on personal feelings and reason. Progressive members are to adhere and to follow the views of their own conscience. Creating your own god in the Old Testament is seen as idolatry.

To further develop a picture of progressive Christianity, consider their approach to the foundations of historic, orthodox Christianity.

Deconstruction

Prior to reviewing specific aspects of doctrine and belief it is imperative to understand the concept of *deconstruction* and its impact on the interpretation of Scripture.

> One definition for *deconstruction* is "a mode of literary analysis in which the unspoken assumptions underlying a text are revealed and even disassembled."[8]

This definition and the views of some postmodern thinkers set the stage for there being no absolute truth.[9] Everything becomes dependent on what the perceiver considers to be truth. The historical and grammatical perception of how the authors of scriptures would write in relationship to the current time and circumstances. Lost is the concept of divine inspiration and inerrancy of scripture.

This allows a person to develop their own set of truth or principles of interpretation—"I think;" "I believe;" "I disagree;" "I feel." All of these provide a platform to disregard historic Christianity and produce a new Christianity. This pattern rejects a systematic belief structure and replaces it with an application of personal opinion and current cultural situations.

View of Scripture (Bible)

Progressives generally see the Bible as "a human book which is an archaic travel journal that documents what ancient Jews and Christians believed about God." In their view, the Bible is our spiritual ancestors' best attempt to understand God in their own culture using whatever knowledge, they had at the time. [10] This low view of scripture results in personal belief superseding any biblical directive or mandate. It may contain the word of God, but it is left to us to make judgements on its authenticity based on our experience, opinions, and feelings. We humans become the final authority for our personal beliefs and practice.

In Fred Plumer's[11] short video on the progressive view of the Bible, he makes the following assertions (paraphrased).

1. The Bible is not the word of God, not inspired, and not authoritative.

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[8] Tony Jones, *The New Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008) 40.

[9] Mark Liederbach and Alvin L. Reid, *The Convergent Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007) 52, 55. Jacques Derride (1930-2004), founder of the deconstruction movement denied the idea of language having a fixed reality. Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) argued for meaning based on context.

[10] Alisa Childers, *Another Gospel* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, 2020) 82.

[11] Fred Plumer served as the President for The Center for Progressive Christianity, now known as *progressivechristianity.org.*

2. We can't understand what would make the people of thousands of years ago to put such terrible things in the Bible (other sources point to war, violence, murder, and rape).
3. The Bible isn't a workbook to be human. It guides us to the right questions to ask in community, but not the answers. It is not a manual to live by.

If the Bible is not inspired, not inerrant, and the product of human ideas then the concept of deconstruction can easily be applied to historic doctrines. God, virgin conception, virgin birth, Christ's advent, Christ's passion, and the bodily resurrection can be completely redefined and reinterpreted to the point of almost eliminating them. This can be seen in the following sections.

View of God

Initially the progressive view of God may appear rather confusing due to the use of the word, *oneness*, which sees God in everything. This sounds much like *pantheism*. Further, some progressives add to the dilemma by describing God in terms of being hostile, abusive, petty, abhorrent, and even bloodthirsty. [12]

Fred Plumer's video explaining the progressive view of God provides some insight. He summarizes it with the following concepts. [13]

1. There is no theistic God who is thinking and interceding for us.
2. God is a mystery beyond understanding—an infinite mystery.
3. It is silly for us to believe we can give human characteristics to a God of mystery. We choose to call it a sense of oneness.
4. We are trying to have an experience with "something" who is in all things.
5. We should let go of dualistic ideas of God and reality; all reality is one connected being.

This view of God has implications in how Jesus is perceived.

View of Jesus

Here it really becomes confusing. There are views about Jesus which are on extreme ends of belief. There are several different forms, and no congregation is told which one is to be their choice or required belief. An example of this is the belief of Nadia Bolg-Weber, founding pastor of House for All Sinners and Saints. She said, "even though she believes in the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the miracles, she is not interested in whether every single bit of it is fact or not."[14]

In his video on belief about Jesus, Plumer states Jesus was a fully human man, born in Galilee, and had fully divine experiences. How he arrives at this conclusion is the question. Plumer further believes Jesus to have been a serious religious teacher who began to share after his oneness experience. His intent was one of moving others to divine oneness so they could see this divinity in themselves.[15] This sounds very much like a Buddhist concept.

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[12] Childers, *Another Gospel*, 212.
[13] Plumer, Video on God, (*https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ppmDw9iGjNA*)
[14] Childers, *Another Gospel*, 41.
[15] Plumer, video on Jesus (*https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ypHNvW5B5HI*).

Utilizing this position automatically eliminates Jesus from being the sacrificial lamb of Calvary whose death on the cross provided redemption for sinful humanity. Most progressives do not accept His atonement for sin—he did not pay the penalty. Instead, they see it as martyrdom initiated by humans. If perchance God willed his son to die, then it was "cosmic child abuse". This view can also be found in the extreme emergents who are part of the emerging church. [16]

Other Views

1. Sin in the human race is not a matter of Adam and Eve's failure in the Garden of Eden. We are good, having been made in the image of God. Thus, there is no need for a meaningful salvation experience to reconcile us to him. Our task is to love people rather than dialog about sin.
2. Being able to question seems to be more important than finding answers. This correlation with number three under assertions concerning the Bible.
3. Prayer may be exercises of awe, wonderment, and gratitude. As goodness flows within one's heart, it allows us to channel energy to other people through touch and out into the world. Instead of praying for healing or direction, a person lays hands on the individual and prays for the energy to flow into the other person and assist them in their need.

Phoenix Affirmations

This document "penned by a group of clergy and laity (2006) in Phoenix, Arizona, stands today as the clearest, most articulate presentation of Progressive Christianity."[17] These affirmations are not to be understood as a creed which progressives will follow. Instead, they are principles which can be amended or modified as new awareness becomes evident. The current document is numbered 3.8.

These twelve affirmations are divided into three equal divisions of four segments, using Christian love of God, Christian love of neighbors, and Christian love of self as the major categories for reforming Christianity. John Shelby Spong summarized the initial affirmations as follows:

> The Phoenix Affirmations call for Christians to love God in all of God's expressions, to love our neighbors, including our neighbors who call God by a different name, and even our neighbors who use the literal texts of the Bible as a weapon with which to attack the objects of their prejudices, and finally to love ourselves just as we are, male, female, black, white, brown, gay, straight, transgender, bisexual, learned and unlearned, left-handed and right-handed, indeed in all of the rich and variety of the human family. We are to stand as one against any religious system that encourages self-hatred, that manipulates through guilt, or that presents God as a punishing parent who delights in our groveling before the throne of Grace. [18]

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[16] "Is Progressive Christianity Dangerous?" *https://christianschronicle.org/is-progressive-christinaity.dangerous/secured*, 10/25/21.

[17] *https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/phosneic_affirmations*. Accessed 2/15/22

[18] John Mark Ministries, John Shelby Spong, and the Phoenix Affirmations. (*https://www.jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/18241.htm*)

SUMMARY OBSERVATIONS

1. The attempt to draw people to Christ in a culturally sensitive approach has mounted an attack on the historic foundations of orthodox Christianity which has the potential to cripple evangelism if allowed to continue its invasion to denominations.
2. The emphasis on love for the downtrodden, marginalized, and otherwise neglected that contributes to social care for the body takes a precedent far above the redemption of the soul from sin.
3. The low view of scripture further contributes to an emphasis on asking questions without seeking answers. It also has set the stage for human decisions becoming the basis for truth in spiritual matters.
4. The emphasis on individuals choosing what they want to believe or disbelieve can lead to *agnosticism*, *atheism*, or *a/theism*.
   - Agnosticism—not sure if there is a God
   - Atheism—believe there is no God
   - a/theism—disbelieving what you believe.
5. Christianity must align with science and other advancements so it can be reconstructed in a 21st century context.
6. Progressive Christianity provides a path of "cheap grace"—salvation without repentance, no prescripts or lifestyle of holiness, and no personal God who is ready for daily interaction.

FURTHER READING

Alisa Childers *Another Gospel* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, 2020).

Jerald Daffe, *Crosses, Coffee, Couches, and Community* (Cleveland: Pathway Press, 2013).

Brian Maclaren, *A Generous Or+hodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

Videos by Fred Plumer:

- *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4iNyE_1qA58*
- *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7JbqO-uFZh4*
- *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHFDepyaJqo*
- *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ypHNvW5B5HI*
- *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ppmDw9iGjNA*
- *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a7Tr-ooqkIo*

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